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ABSTRACT

As governors and states seek to improve the responsiveness of postsecondary education, Kentucky's experience provides a powerful example of a systemic reform strategy. In 1997, Kentucky's governor proposed, and the General Assembly approved, the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act (House Bill 1), which reshaped the state system of public postsecondary education. Kentucky's example represents a promising practice for states looking for ways to improve the responsiveness and performance of their postsecondary education systems. The Kentucky reform effort created and reconstituted postsecondary education structures that are more amenable to change and focused on customers, the state's students, families, employers, and citizens. The reform sets goals and provides incentive funding for institutions that collectively improve state prosperity. One element of the reform is sustained gubernatorial and legislative support for a long-term change agenda. The reform Act also has established a virtual university and library to help meet statewide educational goals. (SLD)

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Postsecondary Education Reform in Kentucky

Issue Brief

Daniel A. Rabuzzi and Ron Carson

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Issue Brief

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Postsecondary Education Reform in Kentucky

The National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices commissioned this Issue Brief *from Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education, the key implementing entity championing the state's reform agenda.*

Summary

As the knowledge-based economy grows, states are witnessing the ascension of postsecondary education on policy agendas. Now more than ever, the responsiveness of these institutions to the changing needs of students and employers is critical to state economic competitiveness. In the last five years, governors have focused increasingly on the performance of higher education. As governors and state policymakers seek to improve the responsiveness of postsecondary education, Kentucky's experience provides a powerful example of a systemic reform strategy.

In 1997, Governor Paul E. Patton proposed, and the Kentucky General Assembly approved, the landmark Postsecondary Education Improvement Act (commonly called "House Bill 1"). Simply, House Bill 1 reshaped the state's system of public postsecondary education. The landmark legislation's overarching policy goal is to improve Kentucky's postsecondary education system as a means to advance the state's economy. Leadership from the governor, the legislature, and the newly created Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education has led to increased performance—enrollment and retention rates are up and scholarship is focused on state economic priorities.

Kentucky represents a promising practice for governors looking for ways to improve the responsiveness and performance of their postsecondary education systems. Fundamentally, the state's political, civic, and educational leadership jointly recognize that Kentucky's 21st-century prosperity depends on a more responsive postsecondary education system. Specifically, Kentucky's reform:

- created or reconstituted postsecondary education structures that are more amenable to change and focused on customers: the state's students, families, employers, and citizens;
- set performance goals and provided incentive funding for institutions that collectively improved state prosperity;
- sustained gubernatorial and legislative support for a long-term change agenda; and
- established a virtual university and library to help meet statewide educational goals.

The Call for a More Responsive System

Since his inauguration, Kentucky's two-term governor, Paul E. Patton, has focused on improving prosperity for the state's 4 million citizens. Specifically, Governor Patton identified his number-one

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goal as improving the quality of life for Kentuckians by raising family income to the national median. Instrumental to this goal was a more responsive postsecondary education system. Patton identified postsecondary education as his key policy issue in his December 1995 inaugural address, surprising many observers of Kentucky state government. Postsecondary education had not previously been a major policy initiative for Kentucky governors. What pushed the issue to the fore and what were the stakes for policy and politics?

The rationale for postsecondary education reform in Kentucky in 1997 was relatively straightforward. By all national measures, residents were undereducated and trailed in income and health. Kentucky lagged the nation and its competitor states in the south and Midwest in high school graduation, college going, and the percentage of population with baccalaureate or advanced degrees. The state's postsecondary system had a long history of low-performing and duplicative programs. Postsecondary education was not linked to statewide strategic goals and Kentucky lagged the nation in its research capacity, particularly as measured by the ability to attract external funding and to attract and retain nationally prominent researchers.

Kentucky's low educational and economic standing forced the question: Is Kentucky's postsecondary education system prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century? "No" was the conclusion after a thorough examination of existing institutions, policies, and organizational structures, documented in the Task Force on Postsecondary Education's March 1997 report Postsecondary Education in Kentucky: An Assessment. To many elected officials, business leaders, and informed citizens the evidence was obvious.

- *In economic terms, the state was unprepared.* The state ranked 42nd in per capita income at only 81 percent of the national average. Compared to its competitor states in the southeast, Kentucky's per capita income actually declined from 1970 to 1995, whereas the region's per capita income increased from 85.1 percent of the national average to 91.2 percent.
- *In quality-of-life terms, the state was unprepared.* The state spends approximately $1 billion annually to treat tobacco-related illnesses—this expense detracts from other investments the state could make to improve the quality of life for all Kentuckians. Until recently, Kentucky led the nation in the percentage of adults who smoke; its youth population rate of smoking is also relatively high. Improving educational attainment was seen as a means to reduce health care costs related to tobacco use and improve all citizens' quality of life. A study conducted by Kentucky's Long-Term Policy Research Center found a clear relationship between education and the likelihood an individual will smoke: an educational increase from high school dropout to college completer reduces the probability of smoking from about 37 percent to 20 percent.

Given that Kentucky lagged educationally and economically for much of the 20th century, what produced a desire for reform in the mid-1990s? The desire grew out of the state's weak economic performance during the 1980s and early 1990s. Kentucky was particularly hard hit by the recession of the early 1980s and limped through the rest of the decade. The state's budget was cut 12 times between 1981 and 1994—more than any other state in the nation. The workforce's relative lack of education was less of an issue when agriculture, mining, distilling, and textile production were the state's economic mainstays, but it became a major competitive disadvantage with the growth of the knowledge-based economy.

Competing in the Knowledge-Based Economy

The first major step towards reform was arguably when Toyota located its major North American automotive plant just north of Lexington in 1986. Toyota's recruiting, world-class training programs,

and knowledge-based quality standards impressed many in the commonwealth. By the mid-1990s, Kentucky policymakers and business leaders were keen to repeat the Toyota experience. They recognized that to attract and retain world-class firms more Kentuckians would need more and better education. The recession of the early 1990s highlighted the urgency of the issue yet again.

Job QuEST, a coalition of nonpartisan business and educational organizations, pushed for education reform at all levels. The group included the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the Kentucky Advocates for Higher Education, and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.[1] Its chair conducted a series of statewide rallies, wrote op-ed pieces for newspapers (most supported reform in editorials), and testified before legislative committees. The message from Job QuEST was that Governor Patton's plan gave Kentucky a way to improve postsecondary education and economic development. The organization acknowledged that the plan would require significant investments, but argued that the package was the logical complement to the reform of elementary and secondary education begun in 1990.

Governor Patton called a special session of the General Assembly in May 1997 devoted exclusively to reform of the system of public universities and colleges. The debate during the session—in the legislature and beyond—was fierce, reflecting a host of regional, institutional, and other rivalries. In one of the most important votes in Kentucky's recent political and educational history, the General Assembly passed the reform bill by a final vote of 25 to 13 in the Senate and 73 to 25 in the House of Representatives.

A Statewide Agenda for Postsecondary Education

One of the biggest changes resulting from the 1997 Postsecondary Education Improvement Act has been the shift from the state's previous focus on institutions to a new focus on Kentuckians and how the postsecondary education system can improve their lives. Results of reform will be measured by answering five key questions and related issues, which the council developed in response to the legislation's request for performance measures:[2]

1. Are more Kentuckians ready for college?
- Are adults prepared?
- Are recent high school graduates prepared?
- Are families able to pay?

2. Are more students enrolling?
- Are more teens continuing their education?
- Are more adults participating?
- Are more students taking courses through the Kentucky Virtual University?

3. Are more students advancing through the system?
- Are more students staying beyond their first year?
- Are more students transferring from two- to four-year institutions?
- Are more students earning certificates and degrees?

4. Are we preparing Kentuckians for life and work?

[1] The Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, independent citizens' advocacy group. Since 1983 the committee, composed of volunteer parents and citizens from around Kentucky, has worked to improve education in the commonwealth at all levels. The committee was also instrumental in helping pass the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990.

[2] Specific performance measures to help answer these questions will be finalized late fall 2001.

- Are students and graduates satisfied with their college education?
- Are graduates involved in their communities?
- Are graduates ready for work?

5. Are Kentucky's communities and economy benefiting?
- Are graduates remaining in Kentucky to work?
- Are employees and communities satisfied with recent graduates?
- Are postsecondary institutions contributing to communities and the economy?

The work of the council increasingly focuses on these five questions and related items. For example, the council recently abolished its traditional two-committee structure, a finance committee and an academic affairs committee, focusing its organization and agenda around "the five questions."

Building Blocks for Reform

The Postsecondary Education Improvement Act reconstituted and created several entities designed to provide coordinated strategic planning for higher education. Those entities include the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the Strategic Committee on Postsecondary Education (SCOPE), the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), and the Kentucky Virtual University (KYVU). House Bill 1 also mandated different missions for the universities in the system, most notably calling for the University of Kentucky to achieve "top 20" status among the nation's public research universities by 2020.[3] Lastly, House Bill 1 and subsequent biennial budget bills created and funded trust funds to provide major financial incentives for system-building behavior by universities and to build university endowments.

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

House Bill 1 changed the structure of statewide postsecondary education in Kentucky. Under the previous Council on Higher Education, Kentucky had essentially a weak coordinating body with a regulatory role. House Bill 1 transformed this statewide entity and created a new label for it: the Council on Postsecondary Education. Moreover, the reform legislation substantially strengthened its role. Rather than focusing on regulatory functions, the new council's fundamental role became establishing and promoting a statewide strategic agenda to further the reform's long-term goals. In 1998, Governor Patton announced the appointment of the council's first president, Dr. Gordon K. Davies, the former head of Virginia's coordinating agency for higher education.

The council's first responsibility entailed the development of a strategic agenda to accomplish the legislation's objectives, Vision 2020. Vision 2020 and the accompanying Action Agenda 1999–2004 identify the leadership required to realize a better quality of life for Kentuckians. Individual campus agendas for 1999–2004 have been developed with enrollment, retention and graduation targets matched by comprehensive campus initiatives. Early results include:

- More than half of the state's publicly supported institutions are nearing or have met or surpassed their 2002 enrollment goals.
- Several public institutions have come close or reached their 2002 retention goals.
- Almost all institutions have reached or exceed their 2002 baccalaureate graduation rate goals.

[3] Among the metrics used by the Council on Postsecondary Education to assess "top 20" status are: total research and development (R&D) expenditures per full-time faculty member, federal R&D expenditures per full-time faculty member, number of licenses yielding income, and number of startup companies formed based on licenses. In summer 2001, University of Kentucky president, Dr. Lee Todd, named a special task force at the university to help implement the concept of a "top 20 public research university."

Further, the legislation enabled the council to be the "single point of accountability" for ensuring program coordination and efficient use of resources. A systematic review of academic programs has since occurred. In February 2000, each university received a list of its academic programs that did not pass the council's first screen for productivity: programs that confer fewer than 12 associate, 12 bachelor's, 7 master's, or 5 doctoral degrees calculated as a 5-year average. Currently, Kentucky's review process has resulted in 143 academic programs being suspended or closed and 161 being altered as of June 2001. Statewide discussions continue to examine opportunities for greater collaboration among institutions and consolidation in such disciplines as foreign languages, teacher education, and visual and performing arts.

The council also had responsibility for the Strategic Investment and Incentive Trust Fund program—a system of strategic financial assistance awards to institutions, systems, agencies, and programs of postsecondary education to advance the state's education and economic goals. Additionally, the council had responsibility for adult education and the operation and management of KYVU. Finally, the legislation established the president of the Council on Postsecondary Education as the preeminent leader in the system. The General Assembly sent a clear message when it established, in statute, that the salary of the council president would exceed the salary of any institutional president.

SCOPE

House Bill 1 also established the Strategic Committee on Postsecondary Education (SCOPE). This important advisory body meets quarterly to consider a variety of issues affecting postsecondary education. Since 1997, SCOPE has been a valuable forum for bringing key issues to the public's attention, particularly key budget issues, in advance of legislative sessions. Among other things, the committee receives a budget planning report in the fall of each odd-number year in advance of the biennial budget session. This report affords the governor an opportunity to advise SCOPE about the financial condition of the commonwealth and the likely funds the executive branch will recommend to the General Assembly be appropriated for postsecondary education. This venue also affords an opportunity for the council to advise SCOPE about how the projected postsecondary education funds should be allocated based on its priorities. SCOPE has proven extremely useful to the council in helping secure legislative and executive support for its biennial budget requests.

The council's representatives are the chair of the council, the president of the council, and five members of the council designated by the council's chair. The governor's representatives include the governor and six individuals designated by the governor. The General Assembly representatives consist of the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House or Representatives, the majority and minority floor leaders of both chambers, the chair of the Appropriations and Revenue Committee of both chambers, the minority caucus chair of each chamber, a member appointed by both the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House, and a member appointed by both minority floor leaders of both chambers. The council's chair also chairs SCOPE and council staff provides support.

The Kentucky Community and Technical College System

Governor Patton's most far-reaching—and hotly debated—proposal was the creation of the community and technical college system. Prior to House Bill 1, the University of Kentucky governed the 14 community colleges, while the state's Cabinet for Workforce Development administered the 15 technical institutions. Combining the two under a central administration has fostered agility and innovation, while freeing the University of Kentucky to focus primarily on its research mission.[4]

[4] The University of Kentucky retained one of the 14 community colleges, Lexington Community College, which was physically integrated into the university.

The technical institutions' national accreditation agency, the Council on Occupational Education, approved Kentucky's change in governance proposal in November 1997. The community colleges' regional accreditation agency, the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), approved the proposal in January 1998. Thus, within eight months of its statutory creation, all aspects of the KCTCS academic program were accredited. The council approved the first KCTCS degrees in July 1998. Currently, KCTCS is serving about 180,000 Kentuckians a year through workforce training, continuing education, employee assessments, and adult education, in addition to serving more than 50,000 students in credit courses. KCTCS employs approximately 3,600 full-time faculty, staff, and administrators with an annual operating budget of approximately $375 million.

Already the community and technical college system is living up to its promise. KCTCS has introduced innovative workforce training programs funded through one of the House Bill 1 trust funds, the Postsecondary Workforce Development Trust Fund, responding to local business needs and providing Kentucky workers with portable skills. Moreover, KCTCS has quickly embraced Web-based education, working closely with KYVU. Most importantly, KCTCS increased its enrollment by 15 percent in just two years—from 45,500 in 1998 to 52,500 in 2000.

The Kentucky Virtual University

The Postsecondary Education Improvement Act also created the Kentucky Virtual University. KYVU is designed to meet the educational needs of working Kentuckians and others who, due to time, distance and family obligations, face difficulty accessing traditional campus-based classes.

KYVU has grown to 4,800 students since it began operations in 1999, making it one of the most successful state-operated virtual universities in the nation. KYVU has pioneered putting student services online and works especially closely with high schools and KCTCS—important partners if the state is to raise its overall college-going rate. KYVU includes a full-scale virtual library, placing a wide range of electronic databases at the disposal of not only its students but also all Kentuckians through public libraries.

Trust Funds

The Strategic Investment and Incentive Trust Fund program is the financial cornerstone to reform. Appropriations to these trust funds are made directly to the Council on Postsecondary Education, which is responsible for establishing criteria for the distribution of funds to the institutions. Today, this program includes eight separate trust funds created to influence and alter systemwide behavior by funding performance in specific areas of state priority.

- *Research Challenge Trust Fund.* This fund boosts the research capacity of the Commonwealth's two research universities – the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville. Two-thirds of the dollars appropriated to this fund are allocated to the University of Kentucky to help it achieve "top 20" status among the nation's public research universities by 2020.
- *Regional University Excellence Trust Fund.* This fund encourages the development of nationally recognized programs of distinction and nationally recognized applied research programs.
- *Technology Initiative Trust Fund.* This fund supports investments in electronic technology for extending access to postsecondary education throughout Kentucky.
- *Physical Facilities Trust Fund.* This fund provides financial assistance for the construction, improvement, renovation or expansion of the physical facilities of the system.

- *Postsecondary Workforce Development Trust Fund.* This fund furthers cooperative efforts among the community colleges and technical institutions to acquire equipment and technology necessary to provide quality education programs.
- *Student Financial Aid and Advancement Trust Fund.* This fund increases student access to postsecondary education, including technical institutions, community colleges, state-supported universities, and accredited private colleges and universities.
- *Adult and Literacy Education Trust Fund.* A recent addition to the Strategic Investment program, this fund will be used to develop a long-term strategy for adult education and literacy and include a statewide network linking all regional and county providers.
- *Science and Technology Trust Fund.* Also a new addition to the program, this fund will support advanced scientific research at all universities, technology transfer to the marketplace, and establishment of regional postsecondary-based corporations to help rural industries access new markets and identify high-tech strengths.

Most prominent among the various trust fund programs is the Endowment Match, commonly called "Bucks for Brains." Since 1998, the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville have been eligible to match $200 million in state appropriated endowment match dollars made available by the General Assembly on a one-to-one match basis from external sources to endow chairs, professorships, fellowships, and to provide graduate research mission support. A new culture of giving to Kentucky's public universities has been created as a result of Bucks for Brains. As a result endowed chairs at the two research institutions increased from 47 in 1997 to 123 in 2001 while the number of endowed professorships increased from 55 in 1997 to 172 in 2001.

In the current biennium, the trust funds house, among other items, an enrollment growth and retention program targeted to increase undergraduate and graduate enrollments and retention rates in the commonwealth. An Action Agenda program also was created to advance the goals outlines in House Bill 1, Vision 2020, and Action Agenda 1999–2004. Program resources help promote university efforts on statewide issues such as teacher quality, cultural and racial diversity, and community development.

Lessons Learned

To secure and sustain system change of this magnitude, leadership is paramount. To send a strong signal that this reform was of highest state priority, a coordinated, concerted, and continued effort among executive leadership was used. The executive leadership team helped develop Governor Patton's plan, pressed for its adoption, and continues to keep postsecondary education issues high on the state's policy agenda.

In addition to Governor Patton, the executive leadership team has deep knowledge and experience in postsecondary education. Comprised of two of the governor's top policy advisors—Crit Luallen, secretary of the governor's executive cabinet and Dr. James Ramsey, state budget director—and council president, Dr. Gordon Davies, the team has sustained the reform agenda at the highest level of state leadership.[5]

Beyond leadership, the following issues proved essential to reform.

[5] The team's leadership benefits from their collective experience in postsecondary education management. Crit Luallen serves as a trustee at one of the state's most prestigious private institutions, Centre College. Dr. James Ramsey previously served as vice president for finance at both Western Kentucky University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Gordon Davies led Virginia's State Council for Higher Education for 20 years.

- **Secure a high-profile champion**. Reform must "have a face." It is critical to link reform to a well-respected, statewide leader such as the governor.
- **Focus on students**. The clients are the state's students, and more generally its citizens, not the universities and colleges. Reform will not matter if the public does not benefit, and benefit concretely through educational access, quality, and increased prosperity.
- **Innovate on the margins**. Indifference from the mainstream kills reform efforts as effectively as outright opposition. The corollary for reformers is to work outside the mainstream, to focus on the margins where innovation can occur and entrenched interests have less influence.
- **Foster system thinking**. Concentrate on problems that require systemic solutions, such as statewide enrollment and retention goals and the commercialization of academic research. Local issues such as curriculum are best left to faculty, to departments, and to institutions.
- **Capture the legislature's attention**. The creation of SCOPE was crucial in helping to secure legislative involvement and support.
- **Delegate authority**. The council has delegated authority to the universities and to KCTCS for academic program approval in most disciplines and for the setting of tuition and fees.
- **Increase accountability**. In return for the devolution of authority, require better performance. Set the performance standards at the outset and publish the results. Representing the largest single investor in each of the state's universities and colleges, the council created key indicators to measure how the public is benefiting from its investment in postsecondary education.
- **Benchmark performance**. A system that refers only to itself is a mediocre system. Colleges and universities must measure themselves against national standards. If the data were available, the council would compare Kentucky's universities and colleges to their counterparts in other countries, not just within the United States. The postsecondary education market, like others, is multi-national.
- **Use financial incentives**. Trust fund dollars that are competitively accessed can be a very effective tool in reshaping institutional priorities. In Kentucky, trust fund dollars are directly appropriated to the council, not to the institutions. In many instances, the council requires institutions to match trust fund dollars.
- **Control the message**. Shape the rhetoric of reform and it will eventually become part of institutional and public policy agendas. Reform succeeds when its key ideas, concepts, and terminology become part of the state's general public policy discourse.
- **Tell the story**. Be willing to speak in the faculty lounge, to the small-town civic organization, and at the student association. Brief reporters and editorial writers. Write letters and op-ed pieces and appear on radio and television.
- **Seek allies outside the academy**. Kentucky's business organizations and nonprofit organizations were crucial supporters of the governor's reform legislation. Education reform is economic development—stressing that point will get corporate and business attention. Their ongoing interest is important.
- **Link with K–12**. The council and the Kentucky Board of Education created a statewide "P–16 Council" to address issues that cross the traditional high school-university divide. For example, staffs at the two parent organizations have worked with high school teachers and college faculty to align math and reading standards so that Kentucky's students are better prepared for collegiate work. It also helps postsecondary education reform to have a consolidated "Big Education" (all sectors, including K–12 and postsecondary) come to the table during legislative sessions.
- **Stay close to the state budget office**. The single greatest, ongoing lever for systemic change is the state budget. The president of the council and the state budget director work closely together, as do members of their staffs.

The most important lesson among these is that Kentucky's political and civic leadership realized that postsecondary education drives the knowledge-based economy. Their comprehensive reform strategy addresses common issues shared by many states:

- lack of a statewide strategic agenda;
- no systemwide accountability;
- unnecessary program duplication;
- no incentives for excellence;
- no incentives for cooperation among institutions;
- inadequate use of technology;
- needless turf battles; and
- inadequate state funding and lack of funding tied to a strategic agenda.

By recognizing the central role postsecondary education plays in state economic competitiveness and citizens' quality of life, the Commonwealth has initiated and sustained a systemic reform strategy focused on improving the lives of all Kentuckians.

Resources

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This *Issue Brief* was written by Daniel A. Rabuzzi, vice president for economic initiatives at the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education where he also serves as acting CEO of the Kentucky Virtual University; and Ron Carson, senior fellow at the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education who previously served as Kentucky's deputy state budget director. Kristin D. Conklin, senior policy analyst at the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, was a contributing author.

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